

# Goodbye, old Web site. Hello, virtual functionality

Web sites are becoming more than just an office novelty. In fact, they may replace the telephone.

by Jacques Habra



In order to understand the advantages of getting on-line today, let's briefly walk through the history of the World Wide Web.

In the late '80s when the first waves hit the Web, simply having an on-line presence was enough. Generic graphics and plain text did the trick.

The next level of Web development pushed the envelope in creating Web sites that were resourceful, attractive, and targeted: the on-line brochure. In the past

two years, sophisticated programming has allowed Web sites to play videos, disseminate up-to-the-second information, and process end-user e-mail. However, fancy images, catchy multimedia, and e-mail make up only a small part of the Web's advantage to the '90s office environment.

The next phase of the Internet will employ what I term "virtual functionality." Virtual functionality entails taking the extra step with a Web site and making it more than just attractive and interactive, but also productive. These Web sites will allow you to do day-to-day business, because consumers will turn to these sites instead of the telephone, fax or e-mail.

Let's suppose you're a typical consumer looking for the right office furniture. After using one of various on-line search engines, you receive a full page

of possible vendors. So you click appropriately and find a beautiful layout of furniture pieces and general information. You keep clicking and discover exactly what the company does and how long they've been in business and where they're located. Probably about 80 percent of today's Web sites stop there. The user is left with some preliminary information that still requires a time-consuming call to the business. But, maybe it's late Saturday night when the business is closed. Or, it's the middle of the business week and the consumer doesn't have the time to wait on the phone for the appropriate sales rep. In these situations, the Web is just a glamorous Yellow Pages, leaving the consumer frustrated with the experience.

You may be lucky enough to find an interactive, second-level Web site. In this Web site, you can request literature information, contact local vendors and even find out the latest news of the company. Even better, it quickly calculates space planning information so you can decide how to design your office space. And although this site establishes itself as an expert in the field and even processes orders, it still lacks virtual functionality.

The user must still go through the traditional motions before a concrete transaction follows through. The potential client, knowing the search has just begun, is left with a bad taste in his or her mouth.

Enter the "virtually functional" Web site, the site that allows you to do *all* your business via the Web. This site will allow you to perform a keyword search through a complete database of furniture product lines. The results are more than just an image and a 50-word

If your corporate objectives include communicating more effectively with clients and staff or cutting costs, then be sure to clip this article for your next staff meeting.

In the next five years, Internet-connected computers will not only be the established standard, they will function as the fulcrum to how companies conduct businesses. Why? Because, the future of business operations is right around the corner. And that future promises "virtually functional" Web sites.

An unconnected office will be as paralyzed as an office with no telephone system. Well, maybe not in that bad of shape, but in bad shape, nonetheless. You may be thinking, "I've been on the Web, I know the hype," but there's a lot more in store and it looks nothing like what you've already surfed.

description. You're served with inventory and delivery information that's really up to date because it's connected directly to the live company database. You now know as much as the company does about what's in stock.

Instead of viewing a two-dimensional shot of the product, you can research in 3-D; you have the autonomy of turning the image 360 degrees to gain full view and perspective. You can fill out an order form on-line for the product. Because this particular Web site is connected to a live database, you know that your order will arrive in two days. You can directly review your purchasing history and account balance at any time avoiding calls to the company's accounting office. In short, the Web site duplicates the jobs of secretary, salesperson and accountant specialist all in one shot. Both companies save on paper and shipping costs, and of course, time.

Virtual functionality not only provides an advantage in exchanging information with clients, but also with company staff. Last month, I gave a seminar at Trendway Corporation's annual rep convention. Trendway is a furniture manufacturing company based in Holland, Mich. Over the two-day convention, 80 national reps exchanged ideas, discussed improvements and raised concerns. Afterwards, management better understood the needs of their reps and the reps better understood the direction and position of management. One of the ideas generated by this group setting was to create an on-line database system.

Normally, when a rep needs an image for a presentation, they call Trendway, make a request, and wait for a few days while Trendway creates the transparency image and then ships the material to the rep.

The on-line image database system gives reps complete access to more than 100 Trendway images any time. The database is password-protected secure to ensure a strong level of privacy. Reps simply type in some keywords like "blue," "cameo," "chair." Seconds later, matching results appear along with a small thumbnail picture of the image. The rep can

then choose to download one of various resolutions of the image or perform a new search. Image reproduction and shipping costs are avoided and valuable time is saved on both ends.

The convention was so productive that it was proposed they take place more than once a year. The Internet bridges the financial and logistical limitations to make monthly and even daily meetings possible. Through customized on-line bulletin board systems and chat systems, Trendway keeps in touch with all its reps. The cost benefit of knowing what your team thinks or deals with can be extremely valuable information.

Another application of virtual functionality is the transfer of documents and files. One of our printing clients, Image Masters, uses their Web site to transfer large graphics files and fonts. Traditionally, their clients would spend time creating disks (making sure they're Mac or PC) and incur shipping costs. The virtually functional way is to assign a password to preferred clients visiting the IM Web site. They may send or

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receive files as easily as clicking a button. No FTP (file transfer protocol) or e-mail attachments are necessary. The end result is a more efficient, intelligent system of communication.

The technology and capability certainly exists for virtual functionality, so what's holding us back from cutting costs and saving time? Security and speed concerns weigh heavily on such projects. The thought of putting corporate databases on-line frightens even the boldest CEO. The problem in the past was finding a team that knew the sophisticated programming, understood on-line database integration and properly implemented security measures. A tall order for many firms, who often specialize in only one of three necessary arenas. And even if you find this dream team, designing the software and secure database integration to perform these processes is only half the battle. The interface must be simple and straightforward for even the most inexperienced user.

We use the rule of lowest common

denominator in our design and programming. Assuming the most basic computer setup and knowledge level, including a slow connection, poor monitor, old computer, and modest Web user, ensures that everyone will be able to take advantage of virtual functionality. If the interface isn't simple enough for the lowest common denominator, then all the hard work securing an on-line database system goes to waste.

These sophisticated problems have sparked sophisticated partnership solutions in the corporate Net industry. Just a year ago, it was typical to see public relations and ad agencies team up with Web developers. The trend towards virtual functionality now encourages Web developers to partner with security specialists who are partnering with databases programmers, because very few companies can boast specialists in all these fields.

As the Web grows, more and more smaller companies are joining together to resist the giants in the industry. Since the technology changes on a daily basis,

building relationships with complementary firms is the difference between being cutting edge or being cut out of the industry.

Web sites that are heavy with gratuitous multimedia operating solely as marketing vehicles will soon be a thing of the past. Consumers are already looking to the Web as a place of business to perform live complex transactions and communicate with corporate management. Instead of surfing through countless insignificant Web sites and slow, saturated lines, people will use the Web like a telephone — simply to conduct business. Make sure your company takes advantage of virtual functionality by installing a net-connected office and creating an innovative Web site that communicates 24 hours a day without missing a beat. ■

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